

## TREATISE ON NAVIGATION

### UNDER THE CULTURAL RAIN (LOUIS ALTHUSSER, MARCEL DUCHAMP, AND THE USE OF ARTISTIC FORMS)

How exactly, in these early years of the twentieth century, do individuals perceive culture? As a form of merchandise, distributed by institutions and businesses. Thus, individuals move about within a veritable rain of forms, images, objects, and discourses, a rain around which are organized both (creative) activities and (consumption-oriented) traffic. Cultural production thus constitutes a continuous downpour of objects—visual, auditory, written, theatrical; of uneven quality and heterogeneous status—from which reader-spectators, using the means available to them and in accord with their education, intellectual baggage, and character, gather what they can. What is one to do when caught in this rain?

In his essay "The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter," Louis Althusser uses the same metaphor to describe the atomic structure of reality as Democritus and Epicurus did before him. Here are the first lines of his description:

IT RAINS.

LET THIS BOOK THEREFORE BE, BEFORE ALL ELSE, A BOOK ABOUT ORDINARY RAIN.

MALEBRANCHE WONDERED "WHY IT RAINS UPON THE SANDS, UPON HIGHWAYS AND SEAS," SINCE THIS WATER FROM THE SKY WHICH, ELSEWHERE, WATERS CROPS (AND THAT IS VERY GOOD), ADDS NOTHING TO THE WATER OF THE SEA, OR GOES TO WASTE ON THE ROADS AND BEACHES.<sup>112</sup>

Let us regard cultural production the way Althusser does rain: as precipitation, as an unfurling of parallel lines, only some of whose atoms will irrigate farmland and truly "serve" or be productive by bringing in an original element, but none of which is totally useless or absolutely without interest. Above and beyond judgments of taste, this rain of cultural objects hollows out crevices and modifies the contours and natural lines of human society. Its total mass is one thing; its individual atoms (that is, this or that particular work) are another. Ultimately,

each atom is capable of being useful, provided it is directed toward a suitable zone. From this user-centered perspective, the value of an object depends on its (always provisional) destination, but this value is never absolute: an aesthetic appraisal of an object must consider the context. The work of art is a locus with its particular *haecceity*, its specific and concrete situation, a landscape capable of being modified or disfigured by the action of *cultural rain*, which comes to disturb the system of relations that produces it as a work.

Drawing on Althusser's ideas, we will tentatively repeat the founding gesture of his philosophical approach by undertaking a return to the work of Marcel Duchamp, just as Althusser himself founded his work on a rereading of Karl Marx's writings, which he believed constituted a pure science whose inaccessible philosophy remained to be invented. The ideologues of state communism had read Marx through the lens of Hegel—that is, following a line of reasoning that preexisted Marx's work but was incompatible with its true nature, a line of reasoning, according to Althusser, that "didn't work"—Something like a diesel car

112 LOUIS ALTHUSSER, "THE UNDERGROUND CURRENT OF THE MATERIALISM OF THE ENCOUNTER," IN ALTHUSSER, *PHILOSOPHY OF THE ENCOUNTER: LATER WRITINGS, 1978-87*, ED. FRANÇOIS MATHERON AND OLIVER CORPET, TRANS. G. M. GOSHGARIN (NEW YORK: VERSO, 2006), 167. THIS REMARK BY ALTHUSSER OPENS ONE OF HIS MAJOR WORKS, WRITTEN ABOUT 1984. IT WILL BE NECESSARY ONE DAY TO EXTRICATE THE WORK OF THE AUTHOR OF *FOR MARX* FROM THE CLICHÉS LINKED TO THE GENERATION OF MAY 1968 AND TO THE COLLAPSE OF "REAL COMMUNISM," THOUGH THIS IS NOT THE PLACE FOR SUCH AN UNDERTAKING, AS HIS POSTHUMOUS WORKS REVEAL—AND AS WAS ALREADY ANNOUNCED BY HIS INCESSANT QUEST FOR A MATERIALIST PHILOSOPHY UNENCUMBERED BY HEGELIAN THEOLOGY AND RATIONALISM—ALTHUSSER WAS ABOVE ALL THE INSTIGATOR OF A RENEWAL OF NOMINALISM, AS ILLUSTRATED BY HIS CONCEPT OF ALEATORY MATERIALISM, WHILE HIS IDEAS ARE ARTICULATED AROUND SUCH KEY CONCEPTS AS MADNESS, PRACTICE, OCCASION, AND IDEOLOGY. FOR ANOTHER READING OF THE CONCEPT OF THE ENCOUNTER, SEE MY "RELATIONAL AESTHETICS AND ALEATORY MATERIALISM," IN *RELATIONAL AESTHETICS*, TRANS. SIMON PLEASANCE AND FRONZA WOODS WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF MATHIEU COPELAND (DIJON: LES PRESSES DU RÉEL, 2002).

that one insists on filling with super. Could it be that, in a similar manner, we have read Duchamp through the lens of a system of thought incompatible with his, and for this reason have been unable to deduce from his practice an aesthetics that remains as yet unknown?

#### APPROPRIATION AND NEOLIBERALISM

Louis Althusser defines ideology as the "imaginary representation that men make of their real conditions of existence."<sup>113</sup> And, by extension, the representation we make of others' activities. In the domain of art, the notion of ideology clearly permeates critical discourse, the interpretation of works, and the mode in which works are presented and classified, but it conditions artists' practices no less forcefully. An "imaginary representation" preexists their schemes, a representation that artists more or less fully escape and more or less successfully challenge. And in light of the emergence today of a culture of use, it is possible to identify certain founding notions of twentieth-century art, including one of its archetypes: appropriation; the term appropriation art having become, since the 1960s, a buzzword of Anglo-Saxon criticism.

The use of existing forms is not a particularly novel practice. Indeed, haven't all great artists copied, interpreted, and recycled masters of the past? This type of practice finds an exemplar in Pablo Picasso, so much so that he veritably embodies the strategy of recycling. An admirer of Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, of Ingres and Nicolas Poussin, Picasso in effect set the pattern for a modernist approach to using art history. For in Picasso's approach to recycling, this use of forms means, in effect, appealing to history, resurrecting it, and in so doing tracing a line from the resultant product to its historical model or models. And in his conversations with André Malraux,<sup>114</sup> Picasso

113 ALTHUSSER, "THE UNDERGROUND CURRENT" (NOTE 112), 230.

114 ANDRÉ MALRAUX, *LA TÊTE D'OBSSIDIENNE* (PARIS: GALLIMARD, 1974).

indeed claimed that through his research into and use of elements of the past he sought to construct the countenance [*masque*] of his own epoch, that is, an equivalent for its "style," which is the word he likewise used to designate the production of civilizations without proper names, whether vanished or not. According to Picasso/Malraux, this notion of a countenance or mask is an exemplary approach to using forms. It is erudite (it never entirely conceals its source), it asserts the history of art as a transcendent entity, and above all it asserts, through peerless virtuosity, the primacy of style. Picasso's entire oeuvre—and the commentary accompanying his use of preexisting forms for personal ends—constitutes a salient juncture in the development of the dominant ideology of cultural use.

EXAMPLE 1: MARCEL DUCHAMP, *BICYCLE WHEEL* (1913)

The invention of the readymade represents a tipping point in the history of art, an innovation whose posterity has been prodigious. With this radical gesture, which consists of presenting an everyday object of consumption as a work of art, the entire lexical field of the visual arts found itself augmented by a new possibility: signifying not with the aid of a sign but with that of reality itself.<sup>115</sup> But does this incredible stroke of aesthetic and critical fortune, if detached from Duchamp's monumental and magisterial work, have nothing to do with the ideology of his time? Does it not ultimately run on ideological fuel? Marcel Duchamp himself never used the term "appropriation." To convey what's involved in the readymade, he made use of notions and terms that do not belong to the sphere of property or appropriation. The manner in which this last word appeared, and in what context, we will explain shortly.

<sup>115</sup> ON THE LINKS BETWEEN THE READYMADE AND CINEMATIC LANGUAGE, SEE THE CHAPTER "TAYLOR ET LE CINÉMA" IN THE AUTHOR'S *FORMES DE VIE: L'ART MODERNE ET L'INVENTION DE SOI* (PARIS: ÉDITIONS DENOËL, 1999).

Within the framework of a questioning of production, a discourse that constantly invoked the pictorial process only to undercut it (in his remarks on the readymade he usually set it in relation to—in reaction against—traditional forms of art), Duchamp insisted first and foremost on the notion of choice, rather than that of production: "When you make an ordinary painting," he explains, "there is always a choice: you choose your colors, you choose your canvas, you choose the subject, you choose everything. There isn't any art; it is a choice, essentially. The [with the readymade], it's the same thing. It is a choice of object."<sup>116</sup> But the act of choosing is by no means equivalent to that of appropriating, even if Duchamp inaugurated the reign of the readymade at a time when painters were using pre-mixed colors from tubes.

Appropriation, with its aggressive connotations, implies competition, a dispute over a territory that could equally well belong to any one of the combatants. Insofar as the readymade implies "giving a new meaning" to an object, or more precisely removing it from its territory or place of origin, the notion of appropriation doesn't make any sense here; it doesn't really apply. Moreover, the readymade is in essence immaterial; it has no physical importance. If destroyed, it can be replaced, or not. No one owns it.

A second theoretical point, which hinges on the first, involves the notion of indifference. The beauty of indifference championed by Duchamp flies in the face of the purely retinal beauty of painting and sculpture: "Instead of choosing something you like or dislike, you choose something without any interest, visually, for an artist. In other words, you arrive at a state of indifference toward that object."<sup>117</sup> And

<sup>116</sup> PHILIPPE COLLIN, *MARCEL DUCHAMP PARLE DES READY-MADE À PHILIPPE COLLIN*, ENVOIS (PARIS: L'ÉCHOPPE, 1999).

<sup>117</sup> *IBID.*

indifference is precisely the opposite of avidity, which is the basis of the property deed. At best, indifference is shared; at worst, it bores and repulses. This idea of indifference is closer to certain concepts of Eastern philosophy: the Taoist principle of non-action (*Wu wei*), or, still more, that joyous form of indifference to the world, linked to the feeling of impermanence, that is the basis of Buddhism. An indifferent object is not something to be appropriated. On the contrary, in the readymade, Duchamp finds an aesthetic formula for dispossession.

The third point, an essential one, is the idea of displacement: the readymade achieves its maximum power only when displayed, that is, when registered by museum and camera, the museum system functioning as recording room and thereby ratifying, in Duchamp's terms, the "absolute contradiction" that is its very essence. This notion of displacement is also the basis of *Sculptures for Traveling*, *Boîte-en-Valise* (Box in a Suitcase) (1935–41), and almost all of Duchamp's oeuvre. Displacement is a way of using the world, a way of surreptitiously eroding established geographies. Thus, the readymade belongs to no particular domain. It exists between two zones and is anchored in none. In light of the three fundamental concepts that preoccupy the readymade, particularly strange is the critique of Duchamp's work that Joseph Beuys gave vent to fifty years later, a critique founded on that notion of appropriation that appears nowhere in the problematic developed by the readymade's inventor. Beuys sees in the readymade nothing but an act of appropriation, because the reigning ideology makes the latter hypervisible, like Edgar Allan Poe's purloined letter, which no one sees so long as it is prominently in view. On numerous occasions—notably on the subject of his performance *The Silence of Marcel Duchamp Is Overestimated* (1964)—the German artist makes fun of the bourgeois side of Duchamp, which according to Beuys was made manifest by the fact that Duchamp dared to put an individual signature on a urinal (*Fountain*, 1917), that is, on an object collectively produced by real workers in real kaolin

mines. Beuys implies that the signature expropriates the labor of these workers, thus reproducing the mechanism of capitalism, the social division between wage earners and owners of the means of production. Duchamp a small-time boss? Later, when Yves Klein calls the blue sky his work, he really does appropriate it. It is in details of this sort that one grasps the reasoning behind such a reading of the readymade, that is, the ideological context in which it is read by Beuys and Klein, not to mention Piero Manzoni and Ben [Vautier], who "sign" this or that aspect of reality in a gesture of appropriation.

This controversy brings to light the ideological nature of the notion of appropriation, which sets up categories of owners of property and those despoiled of it, and does so on the basis of the object's signature, in other words its means of production (its exhibition). Etymologically, to produce means "to bring forth before oneself": exhibition occurs when a signature (a proper name) legitimates the production in public of a collection of forms.

#### EXAMPLE 2: MARCEL DUCHAMP, *LHOOQ*

In putting a mustache on a reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, Duchamp performs an operation that, once again, differs from appropriation in that neither the original object nor its author are in any way masked; on the contrary, they are emphasized, with the aim of desacralizing or trivializing a cultural icon. Here it is a question of the Dadaist use of forms, which is joyfully negating, iconoclastic, and deliberately shocking—what the bourgeois call "prankster wit." It is, in any case, a liberating use that aims to break the chain of what could be called cultural attachment, that is, the conditioned reflex of admiration—what Witold Gombrowicz portrays in his *Polish Memories* when he describes the "gaping mouths" and "vacant gazes" crowding around that very same *Mona Lisa*. These people are not appreciating or evaluating; they are obeying a cultural imperative.

This mode of intervention was later to be systematized by the Situationist International, which put it into practice for political ends. The term *détournement*,\* which serves as shorthand for the formula "détournement of preexisting aesthetic elements," implies a radicality to which Debord and his friends laid claim in a tract against Surrealism, in particular André Breton: "The idea of citing without quotation marks, without stating the source, and with the aim of deliberately transforming it, in short, the idea that one would radically distort [détourne] it, this was too much for him."<sup>118</sup> Constant [Nieuwenhuys] and Gil Wolman intended to "pillage works of the past," but truly "in order to go forward." This first problematization of the use of culture can be found in the inaugural declaration of the Situationist International: "there can be no situationist painting or music, but only a situationist use of those means."<sup>119</sup> In particular, the signature is clearly returned to the status of property title and plainly situated in the general context of capitalist economy—even if that means pointing out the glaring contradictions between the declarations of avant-garde artists and their efforts to protect their patrimony by restricting access to it. As for the contemporary practice of *détournement*, it has tellingly moved toward the dominant code: the logo. We can no longer count the number of artists who hijack [détournement] acronyms or slogans that "belong" to existing businesses, from Daniel Pflumm's pirating of AT&T to Svetlana Heger and Plamen Dejanov's sale of their labor power to BMW (1999), not to mention Sylvie Fleury (the colors of Chanel), Philippe Parreno (in the video *Some Products*, he

presents Picorette, a bygone brand of candles), and the logos appropriated by Michel Majerus in his three-dimensional paintings. Leisure activities are today subject to a specific form of engineering, as are relations among human beings. The capitalist system having colonized every aspect of daily life, the contemporary world appears to be a global assembly line composed of an infinite succession of jobs. All human production that does not conform to a logic of profit maximization thereby acquires the de facto status of an antiquated worker's practice known in France as the *perruque*, a practice that consists of using factory tools and machines outside of normal work hours in order to produce objects for personal use or for an undeclared job. When Pierre Joseph goes to Japan to station himself in front of a factory that produces telephone parts, soliciting workers to teach him how to manufacture various components, he introduces a clandestine element into the work process. Starting from a position of non-knowledge (ignorance is productive and establishes relations), he uses a factory as a turntable. Another form of use-misuse [détournement]: Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe buy the rights to a manga character, Ann Lee, and use it as a heuristic device, asking: how does an image become a sign? And what does it mean to share ownership in a sign, since this character is brought to life across different works by different artists? What does this possibility of shared ownership reveal about the nature of a form?

### EXAMPLE 3: MARCEL DUCHAMP, THE "RECIPROCAL READYMADE"

When he invented the principle of the reciprocal readymade, Marcel Duchamp indirectly celebrated the power of the *malentendu* or interpretive error. He described this unusual cultural object, which was never realized, as "the use of a Rembrandt painting as an ironing board." It is a perfect illustration of the idea of a cultural field in which incongruity rules unchallenged. What could be cruder than this plan? What could be less "cultivated," in Gombrowicz's sense of the word? Property madness. Viewed through the lens of the reciprocal readymade,

\* TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: THE TERM DÉTOURNEMENT IS DIFFICULT TO TRANSLATE; USED IN CONNECTION WITH THE SITUATIONIST MOVEMENT, THE WORD'S CLOSEST ENGLISH EQUIVALENTS INCLUDE "HIJACKING," "REROUTING," "MISAPPROPRIATION," "DISTORTION," AND "DERAILMENT."

<sup>118</sup> JEAN-FRANÇOIS MARTOS, *HISTOIRE DE L'INTERNATIONALE SITUATIONNISTE* (PARIS: ÉDITIONS GÉRARD LEBOVICI, 1989), 27.

<sup>119</sup> KEN KNABB, TRANS. AND ED., *SITUATIONIST INTERNATIONAL ANTHOLOGY* (BERKELEY, CA: BUREAU OF PUBLIC SECRETS, 1982), 52.

every act of appropriation attests to a misuse of the world, to a *malentendu* that has become the very nature of the economy. As soon as it depends on the ideology of property (the "right of access" theorized by Jeremy Rifkin), the right of use readily turns toward the tragicomic.

In 1991, Linus Torvalds launched Linux, a software program developed on the principle of open access to source code, which had until then been treated as a jealously guarded secret by those who sell software—notably Bill Gates and his Microsoft Corporation. This free software, paid for solely through customer support fees (a right of use), guarantees "the freedom to copy the program for yourself or your friends; the freedom to understand how it works if you wish to; the freedom to modify it and distribute your modifications."<sup>120</sup> Thus, the GNU/Linux system is defined in opposition to the logic of Taylorist economics, which is based on the suppression of know-how (since such knowledge incites the user to transform it) and on the inalienability of products, which are assumed to be mass-produced and delivered complete. Couldn't GNU/Linux be said to operate on the principle of the reciprocal readymade?

It runs up against a certain fear related to being a user of technology. This fear stems from our panic at the prospect of reaching our threshold of incompetence. Able to do nothing, or almost nothing, maintained as we are in a system that makes the division of labor seem a natural condition, we are evolving into a culture based on the famous "Peter Principle," which assigns each person a limit beyond which he or she becomes counterproductive, that is, blameworthy. We cannot conceive of manipulating objects beyond certain limits: the ideology of competence induces us unconsciously to refuse reading

120 [THIS IS AN EXCERPT FROM A COMMON FRENCH-LANGUAGE VERSION OF THE FREE SOFTWARE FOUNDATION'S DEFINITION OF FREE SOFTWARE; SEE FOR EXAMPLE [WWW.LINUX.ORG/INDEX.PHP?ID=5](http://WWW.LINUX.ORG/INDEX.PHP?ID=5).—THE TRANSLATOR]

what we are not supposed to understand, operating machines without an instruction manual, making use of worlds that feel foreign to us; this is doubtless misguided. Resisting this trend, Brian Eno says that half of his ideas come to him in the studio, when using a machine whose instructions he only vaguely understands.

#### INTERFORM

The idea, then, is to use forms. But how? Althusser's aleatory materialism is a theory of the encounter: its primitive figure, the *clinamen* of Democritus, consists in "an infinitesimal *swerve*" that "causes an atom to 'swerve' from its vertical fall in the void, and, breaking the parallelism in an almost negligible way at one point, induce an encounter with the atom next to it, and, from encounter to encounter, a pile-up and the birth of a world."<sup>121</sup>

Thus, according to Althusser, the swerve or deviation appears as the principle of all reality. To assert in this way the primacy of the swerve (a change of path, a reorientation) is of course to attack idealism, which presupposes an origin and end for the universe and for history. But it is also, on an aesthetic level, to repudiate the concept of monstrosity. Conceived as an exception to the regular chain of being, the monster exists only by opposition to a nature, a normalcy supposedly inscribed as an absolute law for the human species as for its historical (as well as social and cultural) products. But the notion of rule of law functions only within the limits of a universe born of the void, of the aleatory grasp or staying power [*prise*] of a certain number of elements.

What did Marx say? asks Althusser. He said that "the capitalist mode of production arose from the 'encounter' between 'the owners of money' and the proletariat stripped of everything but his labor-power. 'It so happens' that this encounter took place, and 'took hold,' which

121 ALTHUSSER, "THE UNDERGROUND CURRENT" (NOTE 112), 169.

means that it did not come undone as soon as it came about, but lasted, and became an accomplished fact, the accomplished fact of this encounter, inducing stable relationships."<sup>122</sup> Capitalism (or art) has its rules, but they are like the rules of poker: meaningless when you move on to chess or the French card game *Belote*.

Thus, law is valid only in relation to the—aleatory—nature of its capacity to take hold [*prise*]. The world is nothing but a collection of spatiotemporal universes (societies, cultures, communities) that each represents an exception; there are only cases (the Latin word *casus* meaning both "instance" and "chance") produced by encounters. The monstrous has no distinct reality; it is merely a spectacular instance of the general rule: Edgar Allan Poe's *Angel of the Odd* with his Bavarian accent, Yves Klein's exhibition of empty space, the Residents' *Commercial Album*—ontologically, these constitute exceptions, but in the same way as does a garden gnome or Botero's most grotesque painting. Granted, some exceptions are more interesting than others, but only because they generate more thought, because they are full of thought, because they hack into the community system, into "taste," which is a rehearsal of habits, while others follow the collective inclination and plow well-furrowed ground. In any case, everything is replanted and grafted.

In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche astutely described the opposition between the farmer who cultivates the field and the barbarian who ravages the harvest.<sup>123</sup> A productive use of culture implies a basic practice of uprooting objects from their native soil—that is, a practice of *deviation*. An element that ends up—on an artist's whim, say—thrust into a distant or incompatible cultural register is thereby diverted [*détourné*] from its intended use: displaced. It is thus the coupling of the industrial object with the museum system that produces the

122 *IBID.*, 197.

123 NIETZSCHE, *THE GAY SCIENCE*, (NOTE 08), 32.

readymade. In the 1970s, rap was born of an alliance between the turntable and musicians' lack of means, and the idea spread that one could make do with the instrumental parts of a record, played one after another. But one could just as well trace its birth to the sudden emergence of the Jamaican sound system into African-American daily life. A matter of organizing an encounter between two or more objects, mixing is an art practiced under the "cultural rain," an art of deviation, of capturing flows and arranging them through singular structures. What is the elaboration of a plastic, musical, or literary work, if not the invention of a collection of collisions along with a mode of capture [*prise*] that enables them to endure? For these encounters must be made to take, or congeal, "in the sense in which ice 'crystalizes'" (Althusser). Ice is water that has entered into sympathy with the cold, water that finds a mode of coexistence, a state in which each of the two elements "rediscovers itself." Althusser and Deleuze find common ground here, when the latter defines his concept of assemblage [*agencement*] as "a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns—different natures. Thus, the assemblage's only unity is that of co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a 'sympathy.'"<sup>124</sup> Mixing functions in a mode of coordination: it is the "and" rather than the "is,"<sup>125</sup> the nonviolent negation of the essence of each element for the sake of a mobile ontology, nomadic and circumstantial. "Conjectural," Althusser would say. Works of art create relations, and these relations are exterior to their objects; they possess aesthetic autonomy. "Relations are in the middle," writes Deleuze, "and exist as such."<sup>126</sup> A text by Jorge Luis Borges illustrates the relation to context in its pure form. In "Pierre Menard, Author of

124 GILLES DELEUZE AND CLAIRE PARNET, *DIALOGUES II*, TRANS. JANIS TOMLINSON, BARBARA HABBERJAM, AND ELIOT ALBERT (NEW YORK: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2002), 89.

125 *IBID.*, 57.

126 *IBID.*, 55.

the *Quixote*," he tells the story of a twentieth-century French author who rewrites Cervantes's classic word for word, and demonstrates that the meaning of the resulting work is entirely different from that of the original.<sup>127</sup> Borges's demonstration concerns the most basic form or zero degree of use: the copy. Yet recontextualization in "Pierre Menard" effects a temporal displacement of an object analogous to the spatial displacement produced by Duchamp. These two *coups* [moves, tricks, or strokes], precursors of mixing, designate an aesthetic sphere in which heterogeneous elements are effaced in favor of the form their encounter assumes in a new unity.

We should no longer speak here of forms but rather of interforms. The cultural object—larval, mutant, letting its origin appear under the more or less opaque layer of its new use or of the new combination in which it happens to be captured—no longer exists except between two contexts. It flickers, winks. Through hints—woven between the lines, diaphanous—the cultural object mingles its old attributes with those that it acquires through its presence in a foreign stage machinery. This is the case for a funk record from the 1970s when it ends up programmed, mixed, and filtered into a techno set. It is the case for César Baldaccini's *Expansions* when juxtaposed with Sylvie Fleury's recent *Rockets* in an exhibition curated by Eric Troncy.<sup>128</sup> It is also the case for the Minimalist motifs that Liam Gillick uses as part of the decor for his entrepreneurial installations, and for the cartoon fragments that Bertrand Lavier enlarges in his series *Walt Disney Productions*.

"There is no alternative," Margaret Thatcher once said in her effort

127 JORGE LUIS BORGES, *FICCIONES*, ED. ANTHONY KERRIGAN, TRANS. ANTHONY BONNER (NEW YORK: GROVE PRESS, 1962).

128 *DRAMATICALLY DIFFERENT*, AT THE CENTRE NATIONAL D'ART CONTEMPORAIN (CNAC) IN GRENOBLE FROM OCTOBER 26, 1997, TO FEBRUARY 1, 1998. FOR MORE INFORMATION, SEE ERIC TRONCY, *COOLLLUSTRE*, (DIJON: LES PRESSES DU RÉEL, 2003).

to naturalize neoliberal ideology. It was a lie, of course; every society is born of aleatory circumstances, but after the fact a narrative is devised that finds a foundation for this chaos in natural order. In every situation, the mediocre demand stability and seek to extend this artificial clarity to history itself. Likewise, in art, there is an alternative to modernism that is not postmodernism as it has developed since the end of the 1970s, in the atomized form of an absolute relativism or of regressive fantasies. This aesthetic of aleatory materialism is of course opposed to modernist teleology, which asserted that the history of art had a direction and an origin. But it does not camouflage a return to an alleged natural order, as is the case with those philosophers of transcendence who would replace what they call "the failure of modernity" with a traditional morality. The latter may turn their back on the finality of history and on the idea of progress in art, but their gesture is scarcely more significant than shifting position in bed, since they merely give up the ends in favor of the origins: painting, classical style, meaning. And yet the ultimate reason and origin of things are only two sides of the same idealist coin: to believe that things were better before is fundamentally no different from the illusion that they will inevitably be better tomorrow.

If we are interested in the avant-gardes, it is by no means because of their historical novelty at a given moment. It is not because Duchamp was the first to introduce a manufactured object into a gallery that his work is exciting, but because of the singularity of his position in a particular historical situation that will never recur. Moreover, we have as much chance of rediscovering the configuration of a past epoch, Michel Foucault used to say, as of seeing the same hand dealt four times in a row in a game of poker.<sup>129</sup>

129 FOR MORE ON THE POSITIONS OF MICHEL FOUCAULT, AND MORE GENERALLY ON THE NOTIONS OF SITUATION OR CONTINGENCY (*CONJONCTURE*) AND THE CONTEMPORARY (*ACTUALITÉ*), SEE BOURRIAUD, *FORMES DE VIE* (NOTE 07), I, 1.



Artists who are working today with an intuitive idea of culture as toolbox know that art has neither an origin nor a metaphysical destination, and that the work they exhibit is never a creation but an instance of postproduction. Like the materialist philosopher whose portrait Althusser sketches in his works on aleatory materialism, they know neither where the train is coming from nor where it is going, and they don't care: they get on.

**ARTISTIC COLLECTIVISM AND THE PRODUCTION OF PATHWAYS**  
*Playlist*<sup>130</sup> is not a thematic exhibition—if one had to assign it a theme, it would be contemporary art itself. Of course, it is undeniable that the artists assembled by this exhibition have some traits in common, but this shared thread is not to be located in the form of a particular thematic, technique, or visual source, still less in the form of a shared identity. True artists invent their own identity papers—as for the others, they are at best able communicators of their “culture” or their sexual, national, or psychological particularisms. No, what makes it possible to bring together in one place artists pursuing such heterogeneous ends and using such heterogeneous methods is the fact that they are working from a similar intuition of the contemporary mental space—the fact that they perceive the culture of the beginning of the twenty-first century as an infinite, chaotic field of which artists are the ideal navigators. They survey the crumbling landscape of the last century's

130 *PLAYLIST* IS AN EXHIBITION THAT TOOK PLACE AT THE PALAIS DE TOKYO IN PARIS IN FEBRUARY 2004.  
ARTISTS: JACQUES ANDRÉ, SAĀDANE AFIF, JOHN ARMLEDER, CAROL BOVE, ANGELA BULLOCH, CEROLE RAMO NASH (COLLECTION DEVAUTOUR), CLEGG & GUTTMANN, SAM DURANT, PAULINE FONDEVILA, BERTRAND LAVIER, RÉMY MARKOWITZSCH, BJARNE MELGAARD, JONATHAN MONK, DAVE MULLER, BRUNO PENADO, RICHARD PRINCE, ALLEN RUPPERSBERG, VIDEO PROGRAMMING (IN COLLABORATION WITH VINCENT HONORÉ); JOHN BALDESSARI, SLATER BRADLEY, SUSANNE BÜRNER, BRICE DELLSPERGER, CHRISTOPH DRAEGER, KENDALL GEERS (RED PILOT), CHRISTOPH GIRARDET, DOUGLAS GORDON, GUSZTÁV HÁMOS, PIERRE HUYGHE, MIKE KELLEY AND PAUL MCCARTHY, MARK LEWIS, CHRISTIAN MARCLAY, MATTHIAS MÜLLER, STEFAN NIKOLAEV, JOÃO ONOFFRE, CATHERINE SULLIVAN, VIBEKE TANDBERG, SALLA TIKKÄ.

modernism, observe the easing of the tensions that once stabilized its architecture, and acknowledge the disappearance of ancient figures of knowledge. Using heterogeneous means, they endeavor to produce works that fit this new environment while at the same time highlighting those aspects of our environment that still bear the imprint of yesterday's order. Though we can only sketch the topology of this new mental landscape, which appears vaporous to the myopic, we know the nature of the ruins on which it rests. Since the sixteenth century and the advent of the modern era, the propagation and accumulation of knowledge had been transmitting form and movement to culture. Horizons were expanded by voyages of discovery, while library towers were stormed with the invention of the humanities and of the conventions of gentility (of the “*honnête homme*”). The invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century goes along with the emergence of a new figure of knowledge, the scholar, incarnated by Pico della Mirandola, Leonardo da Vinci, and the “abyss of knowledge” that was to become Rabelais's giant. Today, though, it has become impossible for an individual to master the totality of a field of knowledge, even someone who formerly passed for a specialist. Now we are submerged by information whose relative importance is no longer readily apparent to us, bombarded by data arriving from multiple sources and accumulating at an exponential pace; in an unprecedented experience in human history, the sum of cultural products exceeds both an individual's capacity for assimilation and the duration of a normal life.

The globalization of art and literature, the proliferation of cultural products, and the ready availability of information on the Internet, not to mention the erosion of the values and hierarchies born of modernism, are creating new and unprecedented conditions that artists are exploring in their works, which chart this new terrain for us like roadmaps. The Internet, where almost all available information resides, suggests a method (navigation, whether reasoned, intuitive, or

aleatory) and provides an ideal metaphor for the state of global culture: a liquid ribbon on whose surface we are learning to pilot thought. A principle or method seems to be emerging: this capacity to navigate information is in the process of becoming the dominant faculty for the intellectual or artist. Linking signs, producing itineraries in the sociocultural space or in the history of art, the twenty-first-century artist is a semionaut.

The (conceptual) roadmap could thus be the emblem of *Playlist*, just as the geographical map was that of my prior exhibition, *GNS—Global Navigation System*. It concerns an object with the same characteristics as the Geological Survey Map, both arising from a preliminary data collection, both enabling movement around and navigation of a given space. Moreover, the list of artists could have been more or less identical, except that those who figured in *GNS*, from John Menick to Pia Rönicke, practice a topocritique that aims to describe and analyze the spaces in which our daily lives unfold, while *Playlist* brings together navigators of culture, who take the universe of formal or imaginary production as their field of reference. It's a matter of degree. Beyond its field of application, this method (the production of forms through the collection of information)—a method used more or less consciously by many artists today—attests to a dominant preoccupation: the affirmation of art as an activity that enables people to navigate and orient themselves in an increasingly digitized world. Making use of the world by using works of the past and cultural products in general could also be the master plan for the works presented in this exhibition.

For the preparation of *Playlist*, my essay *Postproduction* functioned as a screenplay or rather libretto, in the operatic sense. I can do no better than reiterate what I said there concerning the notion of a culture involving the use of forms: "In generating behaviors and potential reuses, art challenges passive culture, composed of merchandise and

consumers. It makes the forms and cultural objects of our daily lives *function*. What if artistic creation today could be compared to a collective sport, far from the classical mythology of the solitary effort? 'It is the viewers who make the paintings,' Duchamp once said, an incomprehensible remark unless we connect it to his keen sense of an emerging culture of use, in which meaning is born of collaboration and negotiation between the artist and the one who comes to view the work. Why wouldn't the meaning of a work have as much to do with the use one makes of it as with the artist's intentions for it?"<sup>131</sup> Such is the meaning of what one might venture to call a formal collectivism.

Another hypothesis: could it be that what has been called "art of appropriation" operates not to seize but to abolish ownership of forms? The DJ is the concrete popular embodiment of this collectivism, a practitioner for whom the work-with-its-signature-affixed is merely one point in a long and winding line of retreatments, bootlegs, and improvised variations. Borrowed from the vocabulary of the DJ or programmer, "playlist" generally designates the list of pieces "to be played." It is a cartography of cultural data but also an open order, a path that can be borrowed (and infinitely modified) by others.

#### GLOBAL ART OR ART OF CAPITALISM

"Culture is the rule; art is the exception," recalled Jean-Luc Godard. Along the same lines, one could designate as artistic any activity involving the formation and transformation of culture. Formation and transformation: though the abuse of the term "critical" can be irritating, contemporary artists do not maintain polite relations with their national (or regional) cultures. Yet within the global art world there is a fracture, for the most part unmentioned, that stems less from cultural difference than from degrees of economic development. The gap that still exists between the center and the periphery does not separate

131 BOURRIAUD, *POSTPRODUCTION* (NOTE 36), 20.

traditional cultures from cultures reformed by modernism, but economic systems at different stages of evolution toward global capitalism. Not all countries have emerged from "industrialism" to reach the phase that sociologist Manuel Castells calls "informationalism," that is, an economy in which what is most valued is information, "generated, stored, retrieved, processed, and transmitted" in digital language,<sup>132</sup> a society in which "what has changed is not the kinds of activities humankind is engaged in, but its technological ability to use as a direct productive force what distinguishes our species as a biological oddity: its superior capacity to process symbols."<sup>133</sup> If we accept the idea that the Western economy is post-industrial—that is, centered on service industries, the reprocessing of raw materials coming from the periphery, and the management of interpersonal relations and information—we can imagine that this has transformed artistic practice. But what is the situation for artists living in industrial or indeed pre-industrial societies? Can we really believe that all imaginations are today born free and equal?

Rare are the artists from countries of the periphery who have succeeded in penetrating the central system of contemporary art while continuing to reside in their countries of origin: removing themselves from all cultural determinism by successive acts of *re-enrooting*, brilliant individuals like Rirkrit Tiravanija, Kim Soo-Ja, and Pascale Marthine Tayou succeed in processing their respective cultures' local signs only from the economic center. This is no coincidence, nor is it a simple opportunistic decision on their part. There are, of course, exceptions, comings and goings. But for the most part, the import and export of forms seems genuinely to function only at the very heart of the global circuit.

132 MANUEL CASTELLS, *THE RISE OF THE NETWORK SOCIETY* (OXFORD: BLACKWELL PUBLISHERS, 1996), 29.

133 *IBID.*, 100.

For what is a global economy? An economy capable of functioning in real time on a planetary scale.

In a process that has accelerated and broadened since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the unification of the world economy has automatically led to a striking standardization of cultures. Presented as the advent of a condition of multiculturalism, this phenomenon has proved to be principally political: contemporary art is more and more in harmony with the movement of globalization, which is standardizing economic and financial structures while turning the diversity of forms into the inverted, but precise, reflection of this uniformity. Like an Arcimboldo painting or an installation by Jason Rhoades or Thomas Hirschhorn, the contemporary world is structured in a manner that feels all the more implacable because we can decipher its image only as an anamorphosis, an apparently abstract design unrecognizable to the naked eye—for which it is the role of art to unfurl and display.

Globalization is above all economic in character. Art merely follows its contours, for it is the more or less distant echo of processes of production—and thus of symbolic forms of property, as we shall see. It would be easy to make baseless accusations here, so let us clarify that, far from constituting a simple mirror in which our epoch would recognize itself, art does not proceed by imitating contemporary practices and methods, but according to a complex play of resonance and resistance that sometimes brings it closer to concrete reality and sometimes pushes it further away, toward abstract or archaic forms. If it is clear that there is more to being contemporary than using machines, the vocabulary of advertising, or binary language, let us also admit that the act of painting does not have the same meaning today that it had in the period when that artistic discipline fit the work world like a cog in a clockwork mechanism. That does not prevent painting from continuing to exist; to deny it, however, is to render painting null

and void. Art gives an account of the evolution of productive processes in their global nature, of the contradictions among practices, of the tensions between the image that an epoch has of itself and the image it actually projects. And in an era in which representations interpose themselves between people and their daily lives and between human beings themselves, it is not surprising that art sometimes moves away from representation to become a part of reality itself. Kari Marx explained that, because history is a movement of interaction and growing interdependence among the individuals and groups that constitute humanity, its logical destiny is to become universal. "Global" art and multiculturalism reflect this new stage of the historical process that we reached with the fall of the Berlin Wall, without, however, always providing an adequate and pertinent response to this condition.

For the art world today is dominated by a vague ideology of sorts—multiculturalism—that claims somehow to resolve the problem of the end of modernism in a quantitative manner: since more and more cultural specificities are gaining visibility and attention, that is supposed to signify that we are on the right path. Since a new version of internationalism is thought to be taking over from modernist universalism, the gains of modernity will supposedly be preserved. That, at any rate, is the argument of Charles Taylor, theorist of the "politics of recognition,"<sup>134</sup> who asserts that the "dignity" accorded to cultural minorities in a national community is a "vital human need." But what is valid in the United States is not necessarily equally valid elsewhere: are we certain that Chinese or Indian cultures constitute minorities that will be swiftly satisfied if recognized politely? How are we to reconcile the valorization of "peripheral" cultures with the codes (or values) of contemporary art? Does the fact that the latter actually represents a Western historical construction—a fact that no one would dream of challenging—mean that it is necessary to rehabilitate the tradition?

134 CHARLES TAYLOR, *MULTICULTURALISM* (PRINCETON, NJ: PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1992).

Multiculturalism thus appears as an ideology involving the naturalization of the culture of the other. It is also the other as putative "nature," as a reservoir of exotic differences, in opposition to an American culture perceived as "global," a synonym for universal. Yet the artist reflects less his or her culture than the mode of production of the economic (and thus political) sphere within which he or she moves. The appearance of a contemporary art in South Korea, China, or South Africa reflects the respective nation's degree of cooperation with the process of economic globalization, and the emergence of its citizens onto the international artistic scene is a direct function of the political upheavals that have occurred there. To take an inverse example, the importance that performances and happenings have assumed in former Soviet bloc countries since the 1960s not only reflects the impossibility of circulating objects and the political virtues of cathartic action; it also attests to the necessity to not leave tracks in a hostile ideological context. How can we avoid the conclusion that contemporary art is above all contemporary with the economy surrounding it?

Moreover, one would have to be rather naïve to believe in a contemporary work of art that would be the natural expression of the culture from which its author comes, as if culture were a self-contained, closed, and independent universe—or on the contrary sufficiently cynical to promote the idea of the artist as the noble savage of his or her native language, the bearer of a difference that is spontaneous because not yet contaminated by the white colonist. That is, by modernism. There is, however, an alternative to this globalized vision of contemporary art. This alternative affirms that there are no pure cultural habitats, but rather cultural traditions and specificities cut across by this globalization of the economy. To paraphrase Nietzsche, there are no cultural facts, but interpretations of these facts. What one might call "interculturalism" is based on a double dialogue: one that the artist maintains with his or her tradition, and a second dialogue between that artist's tradition and the corpus of aesthetic values inherited

from modern art, which are the foundation of the international artistic debate. Interculturalist artists who are important today—from Rirkrit Tiravanija to Navin Rawanchaikul, from Pascale Marthine Tayou to Subodh Gupta, from Heri Dono to Kim Soo-Ja—brace their vocabulary on the modernist matrix and reread the history of the avant-gardes in the light of their specific visual and intellectual environment. The quality of an artist's work depends on the richness of his or her relations with the world, and these are determined by the economic structure that more or less powerfully shapes them—even if, fortunately, every artist theoretically has the means to evade or escape that structure.

#### APPROPRIATION ART OR FORMAL COMMUNISM

In 2003, Bertrand Lavier redoes a Frank Stella painting using neon tubes, while Bruno Peinado tackles three of César's expansions in giant hats; John Armleder produces a painting in the style of Larry Poons, Jonathan Monk a cinematic version of one of Sol LeWitt's books. Although they refer to previous works, the works I have just listed are not based on an art of citation. To practice citation is to appeal to an authority: in measuring him- or herself against the master, the artist claims a place in a historical lineage and thereby legitimates first of all his or her own position, but also, tacitly, a vision of culture in which signs unequivocally "belong" to an author (artist *x* or *y*), to whom the present work refers, ironically, aggressively, or admiringly. In Julian Schnabel's paintings of the 1980s, moreover, citation is sometimes reduced to the writing of a proper name. By leading to the borrowing, theft, or restitution of signs from / to their "author," citation naturalizes the ideology of private property of forms simply because it forges an indissoluble link between those forms and the authority of an individual or collective signature.

There is nothing of this in the attitude of the previously cited artists, from John Armleder to Jonathan Monk. Their relation to the history of art

does not imply an ideology of signs as property, but rather a culture of using and sharing forms, a culture for which the history of art constitutes a repertoire of forms, postures, and images, a toolbox that every artist has the right to draw upon, a shared resource that each is free to use according to his or her personal needs.

- It is notable that this collectivist vision of art should appear at the moment of global triumph for the liberal economic model, as if the repressed of this system were concentrated in the universe of forms, finding there a space in which to preserve threatened elements and develop antibodies. Both the underground development of a collectivist culture on the Internet—from computer freeware (the Linux system) to the unauthorized downloading of film and music—as well as the strategic importance assumed by the debate on artistic copyright and reproduction rights together indicate the formation of an interstitial territory that isn't governed by the dominant law.

For a historian of art cut off from contemporary practices, what seems most difficult to understand is that this culture of using forms dissolves imaginary relations that formerly linked borrowings to their sources, copies to originals. On the contrary, it attests to an at once chaotic and collective imaginary register in which the paths between signs and the protocol for their use matter more than the signs themselves. If everyone can see that the imaginary universe of postindustrial societies is haunted by the figures of reprocessing, recycling, and use, this imaginary universe is translated in the discourse of contemporary art by the term "appropriation art." Since the beginning of the 1980s, appropriation art is most often used, in English at least, to describe artistic practices based on the staging of a preexisting work or product. Of course, these practices have been around for awhile, and the notion of appropriation art extends beyond the use of artworks to encompass the larger set of practices derived from Marcel Duchamp's readymade.

In 1913, when Duchamp developed a work entitled *Bicycle Wheel*, which consisted of a bicycle wheel perched on a stool, he simply transferred the capitalist process of production to the sphere of art. First of all, he abandoned the traditional tools of art (brush, canvas), which represented in artistic production the equivalent of pre-industrial labor conditions. With Duchamp, art adopted the general principle of modern capitalism: it ceased to work by manually transforming an inert material. The artist becomes the first consumer of collective production, a labor power connecting up to this or that pool of forms. He is, of course, subject to the general regime, but at the same time, he is free to arrange his space and time, unlike the worker who is obliged to plug his labor power into an existing production system that is independent of him and over which he has no influence.

In *The German Ideology*, Karl Marx describes the rupture produced at the birth of capitalism by a shift from "natural means of production" (in working the land, for example) to "means of production created by civilization." Capitalism could thus be described as an initial stage in the devaluation of raw materials. In art, capital is a mix of accumulated labor (works of art and products of consumption) and means of production (the set of tools available at a given moment to produce forms). Duchamp's indifference conveys a certain contempt for all ownership, even symbolic, that is confirmed by his work as a whole and by his reiterated disdain for the material form of his readymades. A note Duchamp wrote for a work that was never executed further underscores his collectivist vision of artistic activity and the very temporary role he granted the signature: "to buy or take known or unknown paintings and sign them with the name of a known or unknown painter—the *difference* between the 'style' and the unexpected name for the 'experts'—is the *authentic work* of Rose Sélavy, and defies forgeries."<sup>135</sup> Here Duchamp outlines an argument about the gap (the "difference") between style and name, the object and its cultural and social context. Nothing is more foreign to the fetishism

of the signature that is inherent in the concept of appropriation than this aesthetic of relations between things and signs that the readymades evince. In Duchamp's thought, art begins in this infrathin [*inframince*],\* the margin by which the sign differs from what it is supposed to signify, in the space for play between the artist's name and the object that displays it. By contrast, the object that is possessed or appropriated becomes the pure and simple expression of its owner, the owner's double in the legal and economic order.

The anti-copyright movement (Copyleft), for which the Internet represents both the model and the privileged tool, is struggling to abolish property rights for intellectual work, a logical culmination of the end of modern times. As has been written by the group of activists known as the Critical Art Ensemble, "prior to the Enlightenment, plagiarism was useful in aiding the distribution of ideas. An English poet could appropriate and translate a sonnet from Petrarch and call it his own. In accordance with the classical aesthetic of art as imitation, this was a perfectly acceptable practice. The real value of this activity rested less in the reinforcement of classical aesthetics than in the distribution of work to areas where otherwise it probably would not have appeared."<sup>136</sup> In *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Jean Baudrillard explains that "in a world that is the reflection of an order," artistic creation "proposes only to describe." The work of art,

135 MARCEL DUCHAMP, NOTES, ARRANGED AND TRANS. PAUL MATISSE (PARIS: CENTRE NATIONAL D'ART ET DE CULTURE GEORGES POMPIDOU, 1980), FACSIMILE 189.

\* TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: MARJORIE PERLOFF DEFINES DUCHAMP'S NEOLOGISM "INFRAITHIN" [*INFRAMINCE*] AS "THE ALL BUT IMPERCEPTIBLE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TWO SEEMINGLY IDENTICAL ITEMS" (PERLOFF, "BUT ISN'T THE SAME AT LEAST THE SAME?": TRANSLATABILITY IN WITTGENSTEIN, DUCHAMP, AND JACQUES ROUBAUD," *JACKET MAGAZINE* 14 (JULY 2001)).

136 CRITICAL ART ENSEMBLE, "UTOPIAN PLAGIARISM, HYPertextUALITY, AND ELECTRONIC CULTURAL PRODUCTION," IN CRITICAL ART ENSEMBLE, *THE ELECTRONIC DISTURBANCE* (BROOKLYN, NY: AUTONOMEDIA, 1994), 83–84. AVAILABLE ONLINE AT [WWW.CRITICAL-ART.NET/BOOKS/TED/TED5.PDF](http://WWW.CRITICAL-ART.NET/BOOKS/TED/TED5.PDF).

he continues, "wishes to be the perpetual commentary of a given text, and all copies that take their inspiration from it are justified as the multiplied reflection of an order whose original is in any case transcendent. In other words, the question of authenticity does not arise, and the *work of art is not menaced by its double*."<sup>137</sup> Later the conditions of signification for the work of art changed radically, for it became a question of "preserving the authenticity of the sign,"<sup>138</sup> a struggle in which the signature assumes the familiar role. The trend toward organizing the domain of art around the signature of the artist, taken as guarantee of the contents and authenticity of his or her speech, fully took off only at the end of the eighteenth century, with the spread of the system of industrial capitalism. Artists themselves were to become the key marketable value of the art world, to adapt their principles of work to the sphere of exchange, to assume a role akin to that of the wholesale merchant, whose job is to move a product from a place of manufacture to a place of sale. What does Duchamp do with his readymades? He moves the bottle rack from one place to another on the economic map—from the sphere of industrial production to that very specialized sphere of consumption, art.

In using the entirety of human industry as his "means of production," Duchamp bases his work on the accumulated work of others. But the globalization of culture has considerably extended the field of usable products. Artistic capital has never been so substantial; artists have never been in contact with such an abundance of accumulated work. Art in these early years of the twenty-first century bears the mark of this radical change. Since artists have become consumers of collective production, the material for their work can henceforth come from outside, from objects that do not belong to the artist's personal mental

universe but to cultures other than his or her own. The contemporary imagination is deterritorialized, in the image of global production.

#### THE AESTHETIC OF THE "RÉPLIQUE": THE DEFETISHIZATION OF ART\*

As the Critical Art Ensemble emphasizes, "if the industry is unable to differentiate its product through the spectacle of originality and uniqueness, its profitability collapses."<sup>139</sup> It is this pillar of the capitalist economy that is being attacked by the artists in question here. Their works are less the expression of a recognizable style than that of a particular wavelength whose modulations the observer will endeavor to follow. The artistic practice of a Richard Prince, a Bertrand Lavier, a John Armleder, or an Allen Ruppersberg—to cite only some of the artists heralding this evolution—consists not in manufacturing objects but in inventing modes of coding and protocols for using signs.

These hypercapitalist practices rest on the idea of an art without raw material, an art that depends on the already-produced, the "already socialized elements," to use Franck Scurt's expression. Sometimes the act of re-displaying is indistinguishable from that of re-making—the difference is insignificant, as in the work of Jacques André, who displays in a personal exhibition works of other artists (for example, a piece by Jacques Lizène), a frieze presenting recently acquired books or discs, and a stack of copies of Jerry Rubin's *Do It*, the artist having acquired all of the copies of the book that were available in Brussels. Manufacturing, conceiving, consuming: these are just so many facets of a single activity for which the exhibition is the temporary receptacle. When Dave Muller organizes one of his "three-day

137 JEAN BAUDRILLARD, *FOR A CRITIQUE OF THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE SIGN*, TRANS. CHARLES LEVIN (ST. LOUIS, MO: TELOS, 1981), 103, EMPHASIS IN ORIGINAL.

138 *IBID.*, 105.

\* TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: THE FRENCH WORD *RÉPLIQUE* MEANS BOTH "REPLICA" AND "REPLY"; IT CAN ALSO MEAN "AFTERSHOCK."

139 CRITICAL ART ENSEMBLE, *THE ELECTRONIC DISTURBANCE* (NOTE 136), 97–98.

weekends," exhibition-events to which he invites different artists, he doesn't trade the status of artist for that of curator: working with signs produced by others constitutes the very form of his artistic work. The iconography of his drawings derives, moreover, from para-artistic materials (invitation cards, promotional materials, exhibition spaces) staging heterogeneous aesthetics unified by the realism of his drawing. The drawings of Sam Durant combine Neil Young and Robert Smithson, the Rolling Stones and Conceptual art, in the framework of a critical archaeology of the avant-garde. Carol Bove's installations explore the same historical period, 1965–75, when artistic experiments and experiments in daily life went hand in hand and attenuated the difference between high culture and popular culture through hippie utopias.

Today, music continues to provide a procedural model. When a musician uses a sample, when a DJ mixes discs, they know that their own work may in turn be taken up and serve as material for new operations. In the digital era, the piece, the work, the film, and the book are points on a moving line, elements of a chain of signs whose meaning depends on the position that they occupy. Thus, the work of contemporary art is no longer defined as the endpoint of the creative process but rather as an interface, a generator of activities. The artist tinkers and improvises on the basis of general production and moves around the network of signs, inserting his or her own forms into existing channels. A long text by Allen Ginsberg, *Howl*, thus forms the basis of *Singing Posters* (2003), a work in which Allen Ruppersberg, through a process of transcoding, transforms the writing of the beat generation poet into a complex installation. The wavelength of a work, whatever it is, can be transferred from one medium to another, from one format to another: the formal thought of a digital era.

What is the basis for these practices of rewriting, of using existing works? What is the principle, the set of notions, the vision of culture on which they are founded? Is it simply an art of the copy, of appro-

priation? Not quite, for as we have seen, the era evinces the need for a cultural collectivism, for a pooling of resources, and this need manifests itself beyond the sphere of art, in every practice born of Internet culture. Is it a question of a cynical aesthetic whose operative word is plagiarism? Or is it rather the symptom of a generalized amnesia that extends to the history of art? Yet when Sam Durant makes a dozen copies of an image of an ephemeral work by Robert Smithson (*Upside Down: Pastoral Scene*, 2003), the source is clear. And when Jonathan Monk adapts Robert Barry or Sol LeWitt, the referent is no less clearly identified. Citation is no longer an issue—no more than the novelty so dear to people nostalgic for modernism.

This aesthetic is incomprehensible if one does not relate it to a general evolution of artistic preoccupations, which have shifted from space toward time as artists increasingly contemplate their work from a temporal rather than a strictly spatial perspective.<sup>140</sup> Once again, the evolution of the global economy provides a model for understanding this phenomenon: the dematerialization of the economy, which Jeremy Rifkin has characterized by the phrase "the Age of Access," amounts to a progressive devaluation of property.<sup>141</sup> When a buyer acquires an item, he explains, his or her relationship with the seller is short-lived. With a rental, by contrast, the relationship with the provider is ongoing. Incorporated into all sorts of commercial networks and financial agreements (rentals, leasing, admission fees, membership dues, subscriptions), consumers are seeing the entirety of their lives become

140 FOR A DISCUSSION OF THIS PROBLEMATIC AND ITS DEVELOPMENTS IN RECENT ART, SEE THE AUTHOR'S BOOK *FORMES DE VIE: L'ART MODERNE ET L'INVENTION DE SOI* (PARIS: ÉDITIONS DENOËL, 1998), IN PARTICULAR CHAPTER II, SECTION 3, "L'ŒUVRE COMME ÉVÈNEMENT," AND ALSO *RELATIONAL AESTHETICS*, TRANS. SIMON PLEASANCE AND FRONZA WOODS WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF MATHIEU COPELAND (DIJON: LES PRESSES DU RÉEL, 2002).

141 JEREMY RIFKIN, *THE AGE OF ACCESS: THE NEW CULTURE OF HYPERCAPITALISM, WHERE ALL OF LIFE IS A PAID-FOR EXPERIENCE* (NEW YORK: TARCHER/PUTNAM, 2000).



merchandise. According to Rifkin, "the exchange of property between sellers and buyers—the most important feature of the modern market system—gives way to short-term access between servers and clients operating in a network relationship."<sup>142</sup> In aesthetic terms, what is dying is the mode of acquisition, replaced by a generalized practice of access to experience, whose object has become merely a means. This is a logical evolution of the capitalist system: power, in the past based on landed property (space), has slowly shifted toward pure capital (time, during which money "works").

What is a copy, a rerun, a remake, in a culture that values time over space? Repetition in time is called a rerun or *réplique*—a replica, a reply. And the term *réplique*, "aftershock," is also used to refer to the tremor(s) following a major earthquake. These aftershocks, more or less attenuated, distanced, and similar to the first, belong to the original, but they neither repeat it nor constitute entirely separate events. The art of postproduction is a product of this notion of *réplique* (replication, reply): the work of art is an event that constitutes the replication of and reply to another work or a preexisting object; distant in time from the original to which it is linked, this work nonetheless belongs to the same chain of events. It is located on the precise wavelength of the original earthquake, putting us back in touch with the energy from which it sprang while at the same time diluting it in time, that is, ridding it of its character as historical fetish. To use works from the past the way Bertrand Lavier, Bruno Peinado, or Sam Durant do is to reactivate a source of energy, to affirm the power of the materials being reprocessed. To do so also means participating in the defetishization of the work of art. The intentionally transitory character of the artwork is not asserted by its form, which may be durable and solid, and forty years after Conceptual art it is no longer a matter of asserting the immateriality of the work of art. The defetishization of art in no way

concerns its status as object; the star products of our time are no longer objects anyway, as Jeremy Rifkin points out. No, this transitory, unstable character is represented in contemporary works by the status they claim in the cultural chain: the status of event, or of response to past events.

142 *IBID.*, 4-5.

## POST-POST, OR ALTERMODERN TIMES

In a formulation as terse as it is illuminating, Peter Sloterdijk defines the modern era as governed by the worship of rapid combustion—as an age of abundant energy, permanent growth, and “the epic of motors.”<sup>143</sup> Have we really left that world behind? Modern, postmodern, altermodern. So many terms that above all serve to periodize—terms, in the final analysis, by which we take sides within history by stating our adherence to this or that narrative of contemporaneity. According to Sloterdijk, however, we are still “fanatical adherents of explosions, worshipers of that rapid release of a large quantity of energy. I think today’s adventure films, the action movies,” he continues, “are all grouped around this second primal scene of modernity—the explosion of a car or an airplane. Or better still a big gas tank, the archetype of the divine impetus of our age.”<sup>144</sup> The first of these “primal scenes” took place in Pennsylvania in 1859, on the day the first oil well was built near Titusville. “Since then, the image of an oil well erupting, which specialists call a gusher, has become one of the archetypes not only of the American dream but of the modern way of life in general, which is made possible by easily available energy.”<sup>145</sup> As a matter of interest, 1859 was the year that Édouard Manet painted his *Absinthe Drinker*, and that Baudelaire wrote of Eugène Boudin that he saw a molten universe in his paintings: “These ferments of gloom; these immensities of green and pink, suspended and added one upon another; these gaping furnaces; these firmaments of black or purple satin, crumpled, rolled or torn; these horizons in mourning, or streaming with molten metal ... rose to my brain like a heady drink or like the eloquence of opium.”<sup>146</sup> In the same Salon review in which

143 PETER SLOTERDIJK, *IM WELTINNENRAUM DES KAPITALS* (FRANKFURT AM MAIN: SUHRKAMP, 2006), 361.

144 PETER SLOTERDIJK, CONVERSATION WITH FABRICE BOUSTEAU AND JONATHAN CHAUVEAU, IN “VIES MODE D’EMPLOI,” SPECIAL ISSUE, *BEAUX ARTS MAGAZINE* (2004): 192.

145 SLOTERDIJK, *IM WELTINNENRAUM DES KAPITALS*, 354.

146 CHARLES BAUDELAIRE, *ART IN PARIS, 1845–1862: SALONS AND OTHER EXHIBITIONS REVIEWED BY CHARLES BAUDELAIRE*, ED. AND TRANS. JONATHAN MAYNE (LONDON: PHAIDON, 1965), 200.

he vigorously opposes "the industrial horror" as the worst enemy of art, he also glimpses in the calm Impressionist landscapes of Boudin that world "streaming with molten metal" that will go on to become the explosive and pulverized universe of productivist modernity.

This explosive form is explicitly present throughout the twentieth century: in the Futurist painters' celebration of war, in the Cubist vision that Fernand Léger discovered in the trenches of World War I, in the jagged forms of Dadaism. Modernist painting sought to channel or materialize energy: Jackson Pollock's drippings constitute a pure form of this iconography of the explosion, which we meet again in the imagery of Pop Art, for which—even more than Roy Lichtenstein's literal references to comic strip explosions—enlargements ("blow ups") and multiplication represent pictorial equivalents of detonation. The seriality of Pop is not a translation of mass production alone, but also of the chain reactions of atomic explosions; it is the image of a world that is infinitely decomposable by nuclear fission. But modernist energetics is not just represented; it is conceived as a plan of action. Venice must be razed (the Futurists), musical instruments smashed (Fluxus), color unleashed. The modernist program consists in exploding, shattering, and decomposing the visible, in form or in fact. Thus, we find a "rapid release of a large quantity of energy" in the happenings of the group Gutai and the Viennese Actionists, in Jean Tinguely's self-destructive machines, in Joseph Beuys's cathartic performances, and in Yves Klein's "fire paintings." Beauty? "Convulsive," André Breton will say, or even better, "fixed-explosive": like a drilling installation, Surrealist automatism seeks to release the unconscious energies buried in the subsoil of our psyches, preparing our minds for the revolution to come. Isn't revolution the political equivalent of an explosion?

According to Walter Benjamin, one of the defining features of twentieth-century modernism was its aesthetic of shock. Another—as we have seen—was its passion for radicality; it was a mode of thought that

pruned and severed. Who, then, was modern man if not the barbarian of the twentieth century, eager to "topple the old barriers" and throw yesterday's culture—in Vladimir Mayakovsky's phrase—"overboard from the steamship of modernity"? Barbarous, the Futurist dream of razing Venice. Barbarous too, the Dadaists. Savages, those painters who were content to paint monochromatic surfaces. The barbarous is always defined from within the town walls by the defenders of the city. It describes the roving hordes that lay siege to the static fortress. The shock principle that permeates the modernity of the twentieth century is a watchword of unsubscription, a tool that makes it possible to unstick the calcified certainties from their pedestals, to dislodge the traditional icons from their niches. Making art with hammer blows—such was the program of the modernist avant-gardes. Dadaism, which was emblematic in this respect, left behind an iconography of shattering, explosion, and the spontaneous exploitation of human material. "Everything an artist spits out is art," said Kurt Schwitters.

At the same time that Stéphane Mallarmé set out to dynamite the space of poetry, he was also associating with anarchist militants who were widely viewed as dangerous, some of whom were still planting very real bombs in the city of Paris. Is it merely a coincidence that Marcel Duchamp—who took his artistic credo from the author of "Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard" ("A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance")—was also an assiduous reader of Max Stirner, the great libertarian and individualistic thinker of his day and the author of *The Ego and Its Own*?<sup>147</sup> A parallel under the sign of radicality has yet to be drawn between anarchism and the birth of the avant-gardes in the nineteenth century, but even now one can already note their disquieting points of convergence and point to numerous analogies—for example, between the shattered typography of Dada

147 MAX STIRNER, *THE EGO AND ITS OWN*, ED. DAVID LEOPOLD (NEW YORK AND CAMBRIDGE: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1965).

and the movement of an explosion, or, more generally, between the thought of Proudhon or Bakunin and the individualization of artistic criteria that took place throughout the twentieth century, as the age of those "individual mythologies" celebrated by the curator Harald Szeemann. Radical anarchism remains a kind of "unthought" in the analysis of the modernist avant-gardes, a phenomenon that would have to be seen in the context of an energetic theory of art.

It is always interesting to discover an element that swims against the current of a general trend. Right in the midst of the mechanical and electrical fury devoted to the "worship of rapid combustion," Marcel Duchamp privileges "timid energies," delicate ores that art has the power to extract. Thus, he imagines an "apparatus to /record /collect and /transform all the little external manifestations /of ... energy (in excess or lost) /like /for example: the excess pressure /on an electric switch, the exhalation /of tobacco smoke, the growth /of hair and nails, the /fall of urine and shit /the impulsive movements of fear /of astonishment," etc.<sup>148</sup> In 1913, Duchamp's work has already left the orbit of Western productivism and begun to anticipate the world of renewable energy: his work encourages decluttering, taking the same objects and reusing them in different ways, moving things from place to place instead of producing new ones. Jean-François Lyotard, who went on to popularize the term "postmodern" in 1979, describes the artistic process as a transformation of energy, a well-ordered system for recycling matter. In a gesture entirely consistent with this vision of art, he pulverizes the subject of classical philosophy, replacing it with the notions of libidinal flows, drive mechanisms, connections, and energy exchangers.<sup>149</sup> Indexed to progress and abundance, modernism is thus structured around the image of a derrick planted in the depths of the individual and society, a violent explosion of

the visible. If one had to sum it up in an image, it might well be the slow-motion explosion at the end of Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Zabriskie Point* (1970): a movement of decomposition and analysis as well as a detonation.

The appearance of the term "postmodern" is contemporaneous with the oil crisis of 1973, the moment the world became concretely aware of the limits of its reserves of fossil energy. In other words, with the abrupt economic and symbolic break that occurred in 1973, it was the future itself that suddenly found itself called into question in the Western imagination. Is it merely a coincidence that "postmodernism" came into widespread use in the second half of the 1970s, when society was assimilating the fact of the end of abundance? Twentieth-century modernism was the historical moment when the production of goods and signs was based on limitless trust in available energy and an infinite projection of the present into the future. It is this ideology that is compromised by the oil crisis. Postmodern ideology is born in the wake of the energy crisis, just as a depression often follows a sudden loss—in this case the loss of a carefree faith in the world's intrinsic vitality, the death of progress as an ideological foundation. Even worse than a loss—because it foreshadowed and staged an extinction that was situated in a vague, uncertain future, the oil crisis of 1973 is the "primal scene" of postmodernism. Since then, the global economy has sought to end its dependence on the exploitation of raw materials—the transition from industrial production to an economy of postproduction. In the hyper-industrialized countries, capitalism at this time disconnected from natural resources, orienting itself instead around technological innovation (the option chosen by Japan), financialization (the choice of the United States), and the service

148 MARCEL DUCHAMP, NOTES, AFFR. AND TRANS. PAUL MATISSE (PARIS: CENTRE NATIONAL D'ART ET DE CULTURE GEORGES POMPIDOU, 1980), FACSIMILE 176.

149 JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD, *DES DISPOSITIFS PULSIONNELS* (PARIS: UNION GÉNÉRALE D'ÉDITIONS, 1960 [1973]) [NOT TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH]; *LIBIDINAL ECONOMY*, TRANS. IAIN HAMILTON GRANT (BLOOMINGTON, IN: INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1993 [FRENCH ORIGINAL PUBLISHED 1974]).

industries in general. The economy disconnects from concrete geography as much as it can, leaving the exploitation of raw materials to so-called emerging countries, which are henceforth regarded as open-air mines and pools of cheap labor.

Thus, at least in its first phase, postmodernism resembles a mode of thought based on mourning, a long depressive episode of cultural life. Since history had lost its direction, there was nothing left to do but confront a static and motionless space-time in which mutilated fragments of the past loomed up like vague recollections, those "museum's ruins" that Douglas Crimp described in 1980 as the defining characteristic of postmodern art.<sup>150</sup> This melancholy posture constitutes the first period of postmodernism: it is characterized by an intensive citing of identifiable forms from the history of art as well as by the theme of the "simulacrum," in which the image replaces reality in reality itself. The theme of the simulacrum is the symbolic counterpart of the progressive "derealization" of the economy, which is less and less linked to any geological or geographic reality. Because a possible direction for history cannot be determined, history is simply declared to have ended. The eternal recurrence of modernist forms in the 1980s—the decade of all things "neo" ("neo-geo," neo-Romanticism, neo-Surrealism, etc.)—is followed by the relativization of the very notion of history through the medium of postcolonial thought.

The second period of postmodernism, in which melancholy gives way to multiculturalism, is born of the end of the Cold War. 1989, the year of the fall of the Berlin Wall, is also the year of the exhibition that—however controversial it may have been—symbolically inaugurated artistic globalization, *The Magicians of the Earth*. At this point, history seems to emerge from the glaciation generated by the silent

<sup>150</sup> DOUGLAS CRIMP, *ON THE MUSEUM'S RUINS*, WITH PHOTOGRAPHS BY LOUISE LAWLER (CAMBRIDGE, MA: MIT PRESS, 1993).

confrontation of the two great political blocs. The modernist master narrative now gives way to that of globalization: by opening to cultures and artistic traditions other than those of the Western world, post-colonial postmodernism followed the path opened up by the world economy and ushered in a global reexamination of the conceptions of space and time that will remain its historical legacy. Henceforth, the historical clock is synchronous; that is, it is no longer based exclusively on the Greenwich meridian of progress but includes the many different cultural time zones.

At this dawn of the twenty-first century, we are about to emerge from this era that was defined by the prefix "post-" which united the most disparate domains of thought within the experience of a single, undifferentiated "afterward." Postmodern, postcolonial, postfeminist, post-human, post-historical... To situate oneself within the space of an eternal afterward of things—in other words, in a kind of suburb of history—immediately implies a mode of thought in the form of footnotes. It is this prefix, "post-" that will ultimately turn out to have been the great myth of the end of the twentieth century. It points to the nostalgia for a golden age at once admired and hated. It refers to a past event that supposedly cannot be surpassed, an event on which the present depends and whose effects it is a question of managing. This is the sense in which postmodernism is a mode of thought that is inherently reliant on, even captive to, the origin. To move within the space of the "post-" one had first to declare where one came from, to situate oneself in relation to an earlier historical situation. What is more characteristic of the postmodern period than the mythification of the origin? The meaning of a work—for this second, postcolonial postmodernism—ultimately depends on its locus of enunciation. "Where do you come from?" is its fundamental question, essentialism its critical paradigm. Membership in a gender, ethnicity, sexual community, or nation thus determines, in the final analysis, the signification of the works; all signs are "stamped": as a critical methodology,

multiculturalism resembles a system for distributing meaning that assigns individuals to their social demands, reduces their being to their identity, and repatriates all meaning toward an origin regarded as a political revealer. It is this critical model that is in crisis today, this multiculturalist version of cultural diversity that must be placed in question, not in favor of a systematic universalism or a new modernist Esperanto, but rather in the context of a new modern moment based on generalized translation, the form of wandering, an ethics of precariousness, and a heterochronic vision of history.

Since the end of the twentieth century, our spatial imagination has undergone spectacular transformations due to the instantaneous nature of communication and of telepresence in its various forms, increased movement from place to place, and the globalization of goods and cultural signs: space has shrunk. It is now little more, writes Sloterdijk, "than the nothingness between two electronic workstations."<sup>151</sup> Michel Serres regards the highway interchange as the fundamental unit of space today, a view that raises the question of the habitability of the world: "If interchanges are now the basic units of a space through which we henceforth merely pass, how can one dwell there? Answer: we no longer dwell. Is it possible to conceive of, to draw a garden of wandering?"<sup>152</sup> Today's art meets this challenge by exploring this new space-time of conductivity, in which supports and surfaces have given way to journeys. Artists become semionauts, the surveyors of a hypertext world that is no longer the classical flat space but a network infinite in time as well as space; and not so much the producers of forms as the agents of their viatorization, of the regulation of their historical and geographic displacement.

151 SLOTERDIJK, *IM WELTINNENRAUM DES KAPITALS* (NOTE 143), 399.

152 MICHEL SERRES, *ATLAS* (PARIS: CHAMPS-FLAMMARION, 1997), 61.

The problematization of translation in contemporary art goes hand in hand with an aesthetic of displacement and an ethics of exile. Within this intellectual framework, topology itself—which is a geometry of spatial translations—constitutes a privileged mode of representation: forms exiled from one space to another. The mode of wandering—the visual model and monitoring force of these displacements—determines *a fortiori* an ethics of resistance to the vulgar form of globalization: in a world that is structured by consumption, it implies that what one finds is above all what one *isn't* looking for, an event that is increasingly rare in this era of universal marketing and consumer profiling.

The random comes together here with precariousness, understood as a principle of non-membership: that which is constantly moving from place to place, which weakens origins or destroys them, which viatorizes itself and proceeds by performing successive translations, does not belong to the continental world but to this new altermodern archipelago, this garden of wandering.

The universalist and progressive dream that governed modern times is in tatters, and this disintegration is today giving rise to a new configuration of thought that no longer proceeds by building great totalizing theoretical systems but by constructing archipelagoes. A voluntary grouping of islands networked together to create an autonomous entity, the archipelago is the dominant figure of contemporary culture. As a continental mode of thought, modernism had no use for mental insularities. As the notion of progress implies, it was a matter of forming a continent, an international, an avant-garde intent on conquering a territory. In political terms, the *altermondialisation* (or alterglobalization) movement groups together all the local oppositions to the economic standardization imposed by globalization; it expresses the struggle for diversity, without, however, constituting a totalization itself. The altermodern is to culture what altermondialisation is to geopolitics, an

archipelago of local insurrections against the official representations of the world.

The prefix "alter-" which may be regarded as pointing to the end of the culture of the "post-" is thus linked both to the notion of an alternative as well as to the notion of multiplicity. More precisely, it designates a different relationship with time: no longer the aftermath of a historical moment, but the infinite extension of the kaleidoscopic play of temporal loops in the service of a vision of history as a spiral, which advances while turning back upon itself. Altermodernity, which represents a change of position *vis-à-vis* the phenomenon of modernity, does not regard the latter as an event to be depicted but as one phenomenon among others, to be explored and envisaged in a space finally divested of hierarchy, that of a globalized culture busy with new syntheses. Marcel Duchamp, in his own day, sensed the danger of "progress" in art; for example, he developed a passion for perspective at the very moment that it was being relegated to the antique shop by modernist painting. Even more explicitly, he asserted that art was "a game between all people of all times" rather than a direct and univocal relationship with the present. Duchamp was never radical: this nomad hated roots, as well as the principles and cultural determinations that accompany them. In quiet opposition to his time—and even as he explored as yet uncharted aesthetic pathways—he thus embodies a nonlinear modernity which in no way corresponds to the modernity that postmodernism claimed to surpass, but which may find an echo in the modernity now taking shape.

The postmodern myth would thus describe a people delivered from the tyranny of an illusion, that of Western progressive modernism, which finds itself alternately galvanized and made helpless by the latter's retreat. The parallel with the myth of Babel, a universalist and Promethean construction, is inescapable. From the fall of the Tower of Babel were born the multiple languages of humanity,

inaugurating an era of confusion that followed the dream of a unified world bent on taking the future by storm.

Then came a new idea: translation.

In addition to the postmodern myth of Babel, the prefix "alter-" also points to another Biblical episode, that of the Exodus. If we consider the flight from Egypt—that turning point in the history of the Jewish people—we will find that it contains, in gripping abbreviation, the critical question that culture is asking itself today. The Exodus is the moment when the Jews take to the road, leaving behind them the Egyptian machinery of state with its heavy and strictly coded gods, its pyramids, and its obsession with immortality. The Exodus, writes Peter Sloterdijk, represents the moment when "all things must be reevaluated in terms of their transportability—even if it means running the risk of leaving behind everything that is too heavy for human beings to carry." The challenge was to "transcode God, to transfer Him from the medium of stone to that of parchment."<sup>153</sup> In a word, to pass from cultural sedentariness to a nomadic universe, from a polytheistic bureaucracy of the invisible to a single God, from the monument to the document. What the Jewish people realized at that time in the realm of theology is not unrelated to the latent content of the modern mind, whose fundamental character is to oppose territorialization, the pull of a soil that has become an origin and an end in itself, and the ossification of the spirit under the authority of the monument. The modern is ultimately none other than an exodus, the reconstruction, in motion, of the structures of the community, the act of moving the community to another space. There is a diaspora of forms; in it, twentieth-century modernism might be defined as the historical moment when the artistic traditions of the entire world, from African statuary to the masks of the New Hebrides, were discovered and reevaluated in light of the

153 PETER SLOTERDIJK, *DERRIDA, UN ÉGYPTIEN* (PARIS: MAREN SELL ÉDITEURS, 2008), 53.

issues and challenges of the present. Today, the perspective is reversed, and the question is how art can finally define and inhabit a globalized culture, against the standardization presupposed by globalization.

At the collective level, it is ultimately a question of inventing a common world, of realizing, practically and theoretically, a global space of exchange. This shared world (shared within the space of translation) would implement that relativist relativism that Bruno Latour opposes to postmodern relativism, a space of horizontal negotiations without an arbiter. Thus, we move among representations of the world; we practice translation and organize the discussions that will give rise to a new common intelligibility. This is all the more important today—amid the constant unrest caused by economic globalization—since reification has never wielded its power so completely nor with such diversity. Faced with the challenge it poses to culture and art, we must therefore set things in motion again—start a counter-movement—by beginning a new exodus.



AS A CRITICAL METHODOLOGY, MULTICULTURALISM RESEMBLES A SYSTEM FOR DISTRIBUTING MEANING THAT ASSIGNS INDIVIDUALS TO THEIR SOCIAL DEMANDS, REDUCES THEIR BEING TO THEIR IDENTITY, AND REPATRIATES ALL MEANING TOWARD AN ORIGIN REGARDED AS A POLITICAL REVEALER. IT IS THIS CRITICAL MODEL THAT IS IN CRISIS TODAY, THIS MULTICULTURALIST VERSION OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY THAT MUST BE PLACED IN QUESTION, NOT IN FAVOR OF A SYSTEMATIC UNIVERSALISM OR A NEW MODERNIST ESPERANTO, BUT RATHER IN THE CONTEXT OF A NEW MODERN MOMENT BASED ON GENERALIZED TRANSLATION, THE FORM OF WANDERING, AN ETHICS OF PRECARIOUSNESS, AND A HETERO-CHRONIC VISION OF HISTORY.

ISBN 978-1-933128-42-9

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